

Message Text

SECRET

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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5823

INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

AMEMBASSY DACCA

AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMCONSUL BOMBAY

AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

AMCONSUL MADRAS

S E C R E T NEW DELHI 16910

NOFORN

E. O. 11652: NGDS

TAGS: PINT, IN

SUBJECT: DRIFT TOWARD AUTHORITARIANISM

1. IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A SLOW DRIFT TOWARD
AUTHORITARIANISM IN INDIA. INSTITUTIONAL CHECKS ARE STILL
IN PLACE. FREE ELECTIONS DETERMINE LEGISLATIVE MAJORITIES
AND ULTIMATELY MINISTRIES AT THE CENTER AND IN THE STATES.
THE JUDICIARY IS PROFESSIONAL, IMPARTIAL AND INSTITUTIONALLY
INDEPENDENT. THE INDIAN PRESS IS PROLIFIC, GENERALLY CON-
SCIOUS OF ITS ROLE IN AN OPEN SOCIETY, AND OFTEN CRITICAL
OF THE GOVERNMENT. A LARGE PROPORTION OF THE EDUCATED INDIAN
ELITE HAVE A HEALTHY PHILOSOPHICAL COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY.

2. SINCE THE LATE 1960S, HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN
A PERCEPTIBLE DRIFT TOWARD AUTHORITARIANISM IN INDIA. THE
TREND HAS BEEN ENCOURAGED BY THE GROWING ECONOMIC AND
INTERNAL SECURITY PROBLEMS FACING THE GOVERNMENT. MRS.

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GANDHI HAS SO FAR BEEN UNWILLING TO MAKE THE POLITICALLY

RISKY POLICY CHANGES THAT WOULD BE UNPALATABLE TO KEY ELEMENTS IN THE INDIAN POWER STRUCTURE (E.G., THE PWERFUL LOBBY OF WEALTHY FARMERS IN THE CONGRESS PARTY) TO MEET THESE PROBLEMS. SHE HAS INSTEAD TURNED TO MEASURES PRIMARILY DESIGNED TO MOLLIFY STRONG POLITICAL PRESSURE TO "DO SOMETHING" ABOUT WORSENING CONDITIONS, TO ENSURE STABILITY, AND TO MAINTAIN HER PRESENT POLITICAL BASE. THESE MEASURES AMOUNT TO THE SAME "TOUGH" APPROACH THAT SERVED HER WELL IN SUPPRESSING THE 1967-70 THREAT FROM THE "LEFT" IN WEST BENGAL AND THE 1974 NATIONAL RAILWAY STRIKE. SHE HAS INCREASINGLY BYPASSED NORMAL LEGISLATIVE AND JUDICIAL PROCEDURES IN FAVOR OF EXTRAORDINARY POWERS, EXECUTIVE ORDINANCES AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS. SHE HAS ALSO INCREASINGLY RELIED ON THE LARGE AND GROWING INTELLIGENCE AND INTERNAL SECURITY (POLICE/PARAMILITARY) FORCES AND HAS BROUGHT THEM UNDER HER DIRECT CONTROL. HER OWN GOVERNMENT AT THE CENTER AND SEVERAL CONGRESS STATE GOVERNMENTS HAVE INCREASED PRESSURES ON THE PRESS.

3. AS INDIA'S ECONOMIC AND LAW-AND-ORDER PROBLEMS CONTINUE TO WORSEN, MRS. GANDHI AND HER GOVERNMENT MAY BECOME PROGRESSIVELY LESS MINDFUL OF DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND CONSTITUTIONAL DETERRENTS. THOUGH INDIAN DEMOCRACY IS STILL FAR FROM DEAD, THE PRESENT AUTHORITARIANISM TREND IS DIS-QUIETING. INDIA REMAINS ONE OF THE FEW FUNCTIONING DEMOCRACIES IN ASIA. INDIA HAS SO FAR REMAINED THE PRINCIPAL REMINDER IN UNDERDEVELOPED ASIA THAT POLITICAL FREEDOMS CAN SURVIVE IF THE WILL EXISTS. IF IS IN THE INTERESTS OF THE UNITED STATES, IN THE CONTEXT OF A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE, TO SEE INDIAN DEMOCRACY FLOURISH. ON BALANCE, HOWEVER, THERE IS RELATIVELY LITTLE THE US CAN DO TO AFFECT INDIA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM. THE WILL AND CAPACITY TO PRESERVE INDIA'S OPEN SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY WILL HAVE TO COME FROM WITHIN, NOT FROM WITHOUT.

4. THE ABOVE IS THE SUMMARY OF AN AIRGRAM BEING POUCHED.
MOYNIHAN

SECRET

NNN

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